

# Postmodern fiction as critique and affirmation of the spirit of Enlightenment and modernity

Tafara Moyo  
Department of English and Communication  
Midlands State University  
kingsleynumero@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue that affirmations of traces of the Enlightenment project are locatable in the itinerary of postmodernisms simultaneously as the erosive disavowal of certain features of Enlightenment is persistently played out. Seeded in postmodernism is the disruptive iconoclastic act of Enlightenment. Enlightenment dismantled the edifice of feudalism to impose its own iconography and taxonomical protocols. But unlike Enlightenment/modernity, postmodernism's subversion lacks the teleology to install a new iconography. While the impetus of Enlightenment/modernity formulates metanarratives and venerates the deployment of rationalism in creating coherent historiographies, postmodernism refuses any totalising/universalising/homogenising ideological and scientific narratives, as it privileges the deferral of meaning. Yet the relentless decentring of meaning formations must be the desire to equip the reader with discursive tools to know how to interpret a multiplicity of contesting narratives (affirmed in its praxis) similar to Enlightenment/modernity's desire to accumulate knowledge as coterminous with knowledge as power to control and change. Arguably, postmodernism's creation of renegade centres of meaning, after dismantling metanarratives, is inscribed with a romantic rapture; the desire for novelty and the realist ethos of capturing the underpinning social, economic and historic formations circumscribing realities, acts and events.

### Keywords:

enlightenment, postmodernism, deferral, historiography, totalising, universalising, narratives, metanarratives

## Introduction: Enlightenment

The itinerary of irreducible features of postmodernism can be traced to the 18<sup>th</sup> century intellectual movement of Enlightenment. Inscribed in Enlightenment was a practice of accumulating knowledge (inter-subjectively generated) whose telos was human emancipation and enrichment of daily life. Enlightenment privileged the scientific domination of nature over the arbitrariness of scarcity, want and natural calamity. The canon of Enlightenment valorised rational forms of organisation and rational mode of thought as it refused and peripherised the irrationalities of myth, religion and superstition. Its impetus was ringed with the optimism that arbitrary use of power and man's irrational nature

could be excised from the tissue of the human condition. The project of Enlightenment pedestalled the concepts of change and progress as possible and positive and history was defined as a linear progression.

## Postmodernism: Tenets of the theory

Postmodernism, like its literary acts, notoriously eludes any fixity of definition. Originally it emerged –coined in the 1940s–to “identify the reaction against the modern movement in architecture” (Hutcheon 2002:15). Postmodernism as a term gained momentum in the 1960s as used by American cultural critiques and commentators such as Susan Sontag and Lesley Fiedler. These critiques emphasised that postmodernism was “... a new sensibility in literature which either rejected modernist attitudes and techniques or adapted or extended them” (Hutcheon 2002:20). Postmodernity refers to transformations between the 1950s and 1990s, caused and shaped by developments in the political, social, economic and media spheres. McCaffrey points out that postmodernism is locatable within the rise of information technology for marketing, research and production purposes. Fischer writes:

[all] art is conditioned by time and corresponds to the ideas and aspirations, the needs of a particular historical situation. But, at the same time art goes beyond this limitation and, within the historical moments also creates a moment of humanity, promising constant development (1963: 11).

Postmodernism is locatable in the era of multinational corporation surveillance technology, mobile phones, computers, plasma screen televisions and satellite technology. As I shall argue later on in this essay, both Lyotard and Baudrillard are convinced that while modernity is informed and shaped by industrialisation and capitalism, postmodernity is marked by a concentrated commodification of information contrary to the commodification of goods in modernity.

The “dominant components” (Jakobson 1963: 40) of postmodernism revolve around the granting of agency and value to (what the centre calls) the margin or the Other as it dismantles this centre: “... the postmodern challenges any hegemonic force that presumes centrality, even as it acknowledges that it cannot privilege the margin without acknowledging the power of the centre” (Hutcheon 1995: 132). Postmodernism focuses on the local and particular as it contests the claims of universalising/homogenising/totalising centres. It is marked by a “refusal to turn the Other into the Same” (During 1987: 33). Postmodernism’s disavowal of totalising dogmas compels the reader to recognise reality as heterogeneity and the self – reflexive acknowledgement of a text’s own status as “constructed aesthetic artefact” (Fischer 1963: 16).

Another feature of postmodernist writing is its relentless, implicit and sometimes explicit critique of realist approaches’ narrative and representational modes in depicting a fictional world. Postmodernist writing engages the reader’s attention to his or her own process of interrogation and interpretation as he reads the text. Nicole writes:

Postmodern writing challenges us because it requires its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer. More than this, it challenges its reader to interrogate the common

sense and common place about literature that prevails in our culture (2002:4).

Postmodernism valorises fictionality over realism. Fictionality is the condition of art or reality as constructed, narrated and mediated. It represents worlds framed and presented to the reader from the perspective of another and privileges the inter-play between language and the represented world and the relationship between the world of fiction and the real world outside. While realist approaches reject fictionality, postmodernism privileges it. The deployment of language in postmodernism is viewed as an endless play of signs. The next section of this essay explores how language represents and masks meaning in postmodern writing.

## **The economy of signs in fiction**

Both Lyotard and Baudrillard (the former through his privileging of language games over scientific denotative games and the latter through his theory of reality as simulacra) reject any fixity of meaning formations and for Baudrillard any certainty of meaning. The implication of Baudrillard's theory for textual representation is that meaning centres are not only decentred but that meaning itself is not traceable or retrievable; it can be masked by signs and images or the images and signs themselves represent no reality, no meaning; pure simulacra displaces meaning. Lyotard argues that postmodernism creates incredulity towards metanarratives premised on scientific methodology, Marxism and Enlightenment theories of progress. Refusal of metanarratives is synonymous with a privileging of hiatus, a proliferation of aporia and focus on fragments and other forms of apodictic discourses.

Postmodernism art deploys the trope of irony "as a doubled split discourse which has the potential to subvert from within" (Slemon 1988:157) Irony's "inherent semantic and structural doubleness also makes it a most convenient trope for the paradoxical dualities of postmodern complicitous critique" (Slemon 1988: 157). Postmodernism also valorises inversion of reality or the carnivalesque as literary technique. Carnavalesque (Bakhtin 1990: 70) as literary mode subverts the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humour, parody and chaos. It is the deployment and depiction of these tools of postmodernism that are discussed in the next section of this essay, based on Vagas Llosa's novel *The war of the end of the world* (1993) and Dambudzo Marechera's *House of hunger* (1980).

## **The war of the end of the world**

Llosa, in *The war of the end of the world* (1993) subverts Enlightenment/modernity's privileging of objectivity, metanarratives (e.g. Marxism), scientific rationalism, nation, change and progress. His postmodernist artistic portrayal deploys the trope of irony, carnivalesque and polyphony to subvert and decentre dogma. However, in decentring dogma he affirms Enlightenment/modernity's iconoclastic impetus. Subversion of metanarratives and the canon of Enlightenment expose the closure undergirding the narratives of change

and progress. Llosa depicts metanarratives as creating totalising power structures which inevitably fracture when contested by counter hegemonic discourses.

Llosa's characters are concerned with Canudos (a town founded by politically radical dissidents in the racially diverse Bahia state of northeastern Brazil in 1893) is the main setting of the multiple narratives that constitute the novel. Now what Canudos is, is inescapably the domain of meaning construction and contestation as characters vie to impose their meaning construction as dominant discourse; Lola's text refuses to be domesticated within a single discourse. The formation of Canudos by the Counsellor is a subversion of the nation of Brazil. Anderson (1996) has argued that the project of nation formation is an Enlightenment/modernity concept which seeks to homogenise disparity subjectivities and communities into nation. As depicted in the text the totalising of power by the central government peripherises the "wretched" inhabitants of the back lands of Bahia. This peripherisation creates a counter hegemony in the emerging of Canudos as an alternative government which creates its own totalising centre. The contestation of the central government by Canudos and the subsequent dismantling of Canudos show Llosa's postmodern deconstruction of dogmas and totalising centres; thus subverting Enlightenment/modernity's valorisation of metanarratives of revolutionary change and progress.

The Counsellor depicts a Manichaeic world; God is invariably in opposition to Satan (the Dog). Therefore the Republic which he identifies with the Dog must be opposed and destroyed. His formation of a spiritualist state is a menace to the modernising habits of the central government whose hegemony is premised on rational organisation. By tearing the Republic's decrease at Natuba (a town and municipality in the state of Paraíba in the Northeast Region of Brazil) and erecting a stone temple for his subjects, the Counsellor ironically rejects one set of iconography only to replace it with another. Llosa, through the trope of irony, mocks the belief in change privileged by Enlightenment/modernity. The Counsellor's belief that spiritualism will erode the vice the Republic represents, is mocked when the narrator says: "life was far from being perfect [in Canudos] ... even though the Counsellor preached against gambling, tobacco and alcohol ... some gambled and smoked", and "when Canudos began to grow there were fights over women, thefts ... and even knifings" (Llosa 1993:90)

Despite his "taming" the lands of Bahia, the Counsellor's belief in perfectability and change is subverted by the stubborn inherent vice in mankind. Hence the belief that the world can be perfect through change is subverted. In a belated epiphany, the Counsellor discovers the disabling closure of his totalising spiritualist stasis when he says to Antonio Villanova: "go out into the world Antonio, and do not cross inside the circle (dogma) again ... let each one gain salvation through his own effort" (Llosa 1993: 400). By urging the rapture of closure, Llosa's text poses postmodernism's unmuting of subjective voices and the liberation of different subjectivities from the fixities of dominant discourse; to open space for the enunciatory agency of the subaltern.

Galileo Gall espouses the metanarrative of Marxism's objectivity. Like Karl Marx, Gall's motives and narrative are shaped by ideas of the Enlightenment/modernity as he privileges

the dialectical ability of conflict to inaugurate change. The narrator says: “Gall had grown up hearing that property is the origin of ... evil ... that the poor will shatter the chains of exploitation only through violence” (Llosa 1993: 100). This shattering of feudalism and capitalism’s exploitation of the subaltern illustrate Enlightenment/modernity’s ability to question and to dismantle the closure of totalising dominant discourse. In its mode of questioning and transgressing the boundaries of what, in feudalism was privileged as sacrosanct, Enlightenment/modernity resembles postmodernism. However, while Enlightenment’s creation of alternative centres of totalising power structures is a reproduction of feudalistic power discourse, postmodernism decentres metanarratives and simultaneously evades affirming any coalescing of any power structures into dogma.

Gall’s desire in *Canudos* is to establish a communist society premising his motive on the belief that the abolition of slavery by the Republic did not bring change “because many blacks, in order not to die of starvation, returned to their former masters and begged them to take them in again” (Llosa 1993: 150), defies the belief in change and progress. The trajectory of history refuses linear progression as it becomes cyclical. Ironically Gall privileges Marxist ideology’s ability to inaugurate change. Llosa’s textual representation disavows the belief in change by metanarratives, by aborting Gall’s journey to *Canudos*; an abortion of Marxist privileging of the objectivity of change. By infusing the church with obscurantism, Gall – like Marx, configures religion as the “opium of the people”. Because Gall and Moreira Cesar locate fanaticism in the Counsellor but not their own internal fanaticism, the text exposes the disabling habit of dogmatic closure. Gall’s Enlightenment/modernity habit of naming and reordering realities within fixed taxonomical protocols, is mocked when the text exposes the incommensurability between his naming and the refusal of the object of his naming to be domesticated. His obsessive habits of naming, premised on scientific rationalism and objectivity, are exemplified in his rejection of the power of chance in history: he says “we know, comrades, that there is nothing as chance in history, there is always a rationality lying hidden behind even the most puzzling outward appearances” (Llosa 1993: 114).

Postmodernism theory’s appropriation of different discourses and its dismantling of totalising discourse centres create ambivalence. It is this ambivalence that compels postmodernist art to subvert dominant meaning formations and simultaneously defer the meaning of what is created after deconstruction. Between naming and the construction of objectivity or totalising discourse, postmodernist art interposes a studied scepticism that, like an incendiary, fractures the coherence of dominant discourse. Unlike Enlightenment/modernity postmodernist theory privileges the proliferation of multiplicities of meaning centres without privileging any centre’s discourse. Thus postmodern ambivalence permits the different multiplicities of naming created around *Canudos*, refusing, however, that it can be named at all.

The manoeuvre of metanarratives to appropriate (a similar trait of postmodernism) through naming (a deferred process in postmodernism) is its universalising/homogenising habit rejected when Gall’s naming of the particular (*Canudos*) refuses closure in Marxist universalising narratives. Gall’s erasure of Rufino’s subjective ideas on honour, norms and

values illustrates the homogenising habit of metanarratives.

The postmodernist textual representation of metanarratives and ideologies as arbitrary constructions is exemplified by how Gall appropriates rumours and subjective testimonies by Brother Joao Evangelista; by patching together rumours, fragments and subjective testimonies Gall creates a picture of Canudos which he compels into the framework of truth. His Marxist ideology glosses over this patchwork of rumours, subjective testimonies and myths to create the coherence of metanarratives. This arbitrary construction of meaning is also depicted in the character of the near-sighted journalist who spends four months in Canudos “seeing nothing but shadows, vague shadows” yet ironically he insists on writing a story on what he does not understand. This also resonates with the absurd claim of the correspondents who impose their testimonies as true yet in Canudos they “could see yet they didn’t see. All they saw was what they had come to see” (Llosa 1993: 220).

The ambivalence in postmodern artistic portrayal is best depicted in the character of the chameleon and the grotesque lion of Natuba; half human, half animal. The baron equates truth to the colours of the chameleon. This emphasises the transitory and camouflaging capacity of stories in the process of revealing and concealing truth. He says the chameleon is “beautiful..., prehistoric, eternal, half way between the animal and the vegetable kingdoms” (Llosa 1993: 220). By portraying Gall dying like a circus idiot, privileging the deferral of meaning over meaning itself, accommodating the amphibian nature of the lion of Natuba, Llosa’s text liberates chaos within Enlightenment’s coherent rationalities of taxonomical protocols. The textual representation here employs carnivalesque to depict reality as chaos that people patch together, selecting fragments to frame into absolute truth. The process of narration is selective as is exemplified when the Baron says of Gall:

He confuses reality and illusion, he has no idea when the one ends and the other begins It may be that he recounts those things [testimonies about Canudos] in sincerity... It does not matter because he doesn’t see them through his eyes but through the *filter* [own emphasis] of his ideas, his beliefs (Llosa 1993: 240).

The process of filtering ideas emphasises the arbitrariness of narration formation since the habits of this process are exclusionary. The near-sighted journalist’s broken monocle symbolises mankind’s inability to create a perfect interpretation of reality. The fracture of the monocle is also the fracture of any totalising narrative that pretends to impose absolute truth. Moreira Cesar’s Enlightenment/modernity privileging of industries, machinery and modern technology is subverted by the ubiquitous presence of marginalised, exploited, poor and dehumanised subjectivities in Bahia. His promethean desire for progress is countermanded by modernity’s emptying of human values as it privileges mechanisation and the fixities of scientific rationalism.

The Baron’s symbol of narratives as a “tree of stories” is postmodernism’s privileging of polyphony and difference. Postmodernist’s deferral of meaning is extended in this textual representation to depict meaning as simulacra. The English rifles and the English corpse that Epaminondas Goncalves plants to occlude reality from Moraira Cesar, represent no meaning beyond themselves hence they assume the identity of Baudrillard’s

pure simulacra.

In *The war of the end of the world*, Llosa subverts metanarratives, scientific rationalism, objectivity, progress and change by privileging the heterogeneity of subjective narratives; emphasising that narratives are arbitrarily constructed and that therefore, totalising dominant discourses are fractured even as they inaugurate their narration.

## **Marechera's *House of Hunger*: reality is fiction**

In *House of Hunger* (1980) Marechera's textual representation raptures the boundaries of coherence of narratives to present reality as fiction. His textual representation refuses realism's privileging of rational organisation underlying relations between people and relations between other phenomena. He also disavows any privileging of any authorising centre as he liberates a multiplicity of muted peripherised subjectivities.

Colonialism is shaped by the civilising mission developed in the dominant metropolises of Europe. The *House of hunger* depicts the impact of colonialism's disruptive discourse of conquest. While the civilising mission claims to convert the Other into the Same, the doublespeak of colonialism emerges in its discriminating and dehumanising of the Other. This double articulation by colonialism is its fracture which discloses that, Enlightenment/modernity's realism is in fact fiction. The civilising mission claimed to rehabilitate the colonised into the space of the human, yet it inaugurated a discourse that created neurosis, violence in families, prostitution, crime and the brutal dismantling of tradition, norms and values without creating an alternative set of norms and values to integrate the colonised.

The wife battering, a norm as depicted in the *House of hunger*, is a consequence of the violence initiated by colonialism; as can be exemplified by a hierarchised mode of violence in this society. When Peter the narrator's brother is quizzed as to why he can't convert his life into something purposeful, he says "ask Ian Smith". The technique of carnivalesque is textually employed to unleash chaos in all narratives that may make a pretence to realistic articulation of truth. The depiction of boys masturbating in public in the streets and men raping their wives in the thick of crowds subverts and mocks the realism of colonialism's civilising mission which inaugurated this hierarchy of violence and chaos. The colonised's norms and values are emptied out and he is reduced to a deprived existence:

It was the house of hunger that first made me discontented about things. I knew my father only as that character who occasionally screwed my mother and who paid rent, beat me up and was cuckolded by various other persons ... he was an alcoholic (Marechera 1980: 77).

This portrayal subverts the modernist realism's claim that colonising the black man was synonymous with civilising him. Colonisation is depicted as a disease; the venereal diseases and the STDs that scar the malehood of most male characters. This disease erodes the culture of the subaltern and in the place of the erosion opens the abyss of existential crises and chaos. The realism of colonialism's civilising mission is subverted in the image of the prostitute whom the narrator and his friends follow to her bush rendezvous:

It's just that we could see on the gravel road splotches and stains of semen that were dripping down her as she walked. Years later I was to write a story using her as a symbol of Rhodesia (Marechera 1980: 49).

The textual reduction of the colonised's existence to stains (blood and semen) is a portrayal of the contamination and annihilation of their humanity as exemplified by the reduction of the narrator's father's body to stains by a rushing train. The fact that the narrator says it was an 18<sup>th</sup> century train, causes Marechera's postmodernist project to subvert the coloniser's modernist civilising narrative. The deliberate infusion of myths, fairy tales and legends in his textual narration is a disavowal of realism's dictums of narration. In the untitled story of "mad Andrew" the framing of narration in the fairy story mode is a quest by the author to suspend reality. The two dinosaurs mock modern realism, which to them is a ridiculous illusion. By jolting Andrew back to earth with a blow (jolting him from venerating tragic heroes and heroines of *world* literature) Marechera's textual narrative is to retrieve the reading subject from occluding, universalising and homogenising narratives that peripherise the particular and local. Universalising narratives (e.g. colonialism) by erasing the local and particular, create the illusion that the colonised Other enjoys similar civil rights as the Same. Thus Marechera's subversive strategies destroy the normal boundary between fantasy and illusion.

In "Burning in the rain" mirages invade the place of realism so that one can see the illusion of reality and the reality of illusion. In the untitled story of "mad Andrew" the deflation of the manifesto given to him by Mr Warthog is a refusal of all narratives that claim to offer solutions to problems that unsettle human beings. The narrator says this deflation is his subjective authority to:

... insist upon your right to go off at a tangent. Your right to put the spanner in the works ... to insist on your right to confound all who insist on regimenting human impulses according to theories psychological, religious, historical... your right to insist upon the great importance of whim (Marechera 1980: 122).

In "Protista" and in a "Writer's grain" the image of the replicating circle ( little circles eaten or eating the big circles and everything in everything else, so much so that I still wonder how on earth I found my way out of that labyrinth (Marechera 1980: 100). Is the writers deliberate involvement of the reader in the process of meaning formation? It can also be interpreted as the rejection of narratives that follow linear progression. The phrase "everything and everything else" poses postmodernism's ability to appropriate different techniques and literary strategies. The image of the labyrinth pauses the postmodern affirmation of the deferral and irretrievability of meaning or truth in narrations. This is emphasised by Marechera's narrative that depicts the narrator as schizophrenic; the voices that multiply inside him and vie for narrative privilege, contaminate the coherence of the metanarratives of realism.

Realism, as Enlightenment/modernity's project, is subverted and mocked by Marechera's literary form and technique. In his narrative myths, legends and fairy-tales, like in Amos Tuotola's *Palm wine drinkard*, Marechera displaces the pretence to realistic representa-



tion by the project of realism. Yet postmodernism's fracturing of realism's project is a realist process in itself (if postmodernism is to retain its theoretical legitimacy). The next section poses and interrogates some of the criticisms levelled against postmodernism.

## **Postmodernism: A critique and affirmation of Enlightenment and modernity**

African intellectuals have argued that postmodernism is no more than a dissimulating discourse, pre-emptively shaped to salvage what remains of the diminishing cultural authority of the Western story (Olaniyan 2003). African critiques also reject postmodernism's decentring of the subject, which poses scepticism towards all truth claims, political agendas and politics. The telos of this scepticism, African critiques argue, is to reduce the project of decolonisation to a space where its voice equals the voice of the metropole's voice, thus dismantling the legitimate discourse of decolonisation. But Olaniyan (2003) also agrees that critics should acknowledge that postmodernism liberates muted voices; the voices of the doubly colonised women. To condemn postmodernism as a theory teleologically programmed to affirm certain political agendas and results, is to miss the ambivalent nature of postmodernism. Postmodernism has also been criticised as a-historical, as critics claim that it is fixated in a narcissistic portrayal of its hold on language and literary technique at the expense of concrete realities.

## **Conclusion**

Postmodernism, I argue, in its deferral of meaning and deconstruction of meaning formations, is invaluable in the projects of decolonisation, despite its ambivalent contamination of the colonised's anticolonialism narrative with scepticism. Postmodernism's strategies are best defined in the context of its ambivalent manoeuvres. Its stance of meaning deferral does not logically defy meaning retrievability; rather, it defies meaning retrievability in narratives whose coherence constitutes the plaster of ideology and dominant discourse. Enlightenment/modernity's projects of civilising and modernising have historically been subverted by the persistent presence of racial violence, poverty and disease in the world. Postmodernism as a discursive and literary mode has been able to expose the pretence to change and progress privileged by Enlightenment/modernity.

This essay, through the textual representations of Llosa's *The war of the end of the world* (1993) and Marechera's *House of hunger* (1980), has demonstrated that postmodernism subverts totalising power structures privileged by metanarratives. Metanarratives that espouse objectivity, veneration of change and progress, are exposed and mocked as fissured even as they inaugurate their narration. Postmodernism affirms Enlightenment/modernity's iconoclasm, the habit of questioning realities, but postmodernism refuses the totalising habits of the projects of modernity by not affirming any privileging of any solutions or iconography.

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